
The Origin of the Polynesian Race

Author(s): W. D. Alexander

Source: *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Oct., 1910), pp. 221-230

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29737859>

Accessed: 15/07/2014 09:37

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



<http://www.jstor.org>

THE ORIGIN OF THE POLYNESIAN RACE.

By W. D. Alexander, LL.D., Honolulu.

The origin of this, the most isolated and widely scattered, and yet one of the most homogeneous of all races, is still involved in mystery.

The unity of the race is remarkable. From Hawaii to New Zealand and from Samoa to Easter Island, we find the same physical and moral characteristics, the same customs and arts, similar mythology and folk-lore, and languages more closely related to each other than Italian is to Spanish.

THEORY OF THE AMERICAN ORIGIN OF THE RACE.

The unity of the race being evident, the question remains whether the original settlers migrated from Asia or America.

The advocates of the latter theory laid great stress on the fact that the trade winds blow from the north-east in the northern hemisphere, and from the south-east in the southern hemisphere, most of the year, while the Equatorial current also sets from east to west. They point to the fact that pine logs from the north-west coast of North America often drift upon the eastern shores of the Hawaiian Islands. On the other hand, however, south-westerly winds prevail for several weeks at a time during the winter months. Prof. Otto Sittig has compiled an extensive list of known compulsory voyages in the Pacific Ocean made from east to west. For example, Capt. Kotzebue found one Kadu in the Radack chain, who with three others had been overtaken by a storm near Yap in the Caroline Islands, and drifted 1680 miles from west to east. In December, 1832, a Japanese fishing vessel drifted ashore at Waialua, Oahu, Hawaiian Islands having been eleven months on the way.

On the other hand, the method of fire-making by "rapidly rubbing the blunt point of a hard stick in a groove

formed in a horizontal piece of a softer wood, till the dust collected in the latter takes fire," is confined to Polynesia and Melanesia. The absence of pottery, and of the use of the bow in war, also militates against the theory of the American origin of these people.

Another argument is founded on the fact that in the opinion of many botanists, the cocoanut palm as well as the sweet potato originated on the American Continent.

On the other hand, the evidence is overwhelming that the banana, the breadfruit, the ohia or jambo and the sugar cane are of Old World origin, while maize, tobacco and the papaya were not introduced into these islands till after their discovery.

By far the greater part of the flora and fauna of Polynesia is Asiatic in its affinities. As to the seedless breadfruit, the banana, taro, sugar cane, etc., they could not possibly have reached the islands except by human agency; and these plants are undoubtedly Asiatic.

On the whole, the evidence from both physical and mental traits is decidedly against the theory of an American origin. The American Indians are evidently Mongoloids from Northern Asia, including perhaps a small contingent from Indonesia, which, as the late Otis T. Mason has shown, probably followed the ocean currents along the Asiatic coast, through a series of land-locked seas, abounding in food supplies, until they reached America. This may help to explain any apparent traces of Polynesian influence on the North-west coast.

The languages of North America are generally harsh, and they all have a complex synthetic structure, removed as far as possible from the euphony and the simple analytical grammar characterizing the Polynesian languages.

While the Polynesians were skillful and daring navigators, the natives of the western coast of America are among the least maritime of known races.

Again, as has been shown by Prof. Lewis H. Morgan, the system of consanguinity prevailing among the Polynesians is radically different on the one hand from that prevailing throughout North America, and on the other from that in force among the Aryan and Semitic races.

The universal belief of the Polynesians that the spirit of their dead pass to the west, where they rejoin those of their ancestors, would also seem to show that their original home lay in that direction.

ANTIQUITY OF MAN IN POLYNESIA.

Many considerations combine to prove the great antiquity of man in Polynesia. Prof. Macmillan Browne has ably presented the evidences of this, as seen on the one hand in ancient traditions and relics, and on the other hand in the characteristics of the native culture.

The New Zealand traditions mention a number of aboriginal tribes. In a similar way the Hawaiian had numerous legends about the "Menehunes," described as a race of industrious and skillful dwarfs, who were said to have built the great fishpond walls and to have dug extensive irrigation ditches. In the South Island of New Zealand there are vast shell mounds containing bones of the extinct Moa birds, and ancient Maori ovens and stone implements have been found fourteen feet below the present surface of the ground, under an ancient forest.

In an article entitled "First Wells of Honolulu," by James Hunnewell, in *Hawaiian Club Papers*, p. 31, it is stated that the first wells in Honolulu were dug in 1822. "They passed through eight or ten feet of surface soil and volcanic sand, when a coral bed eight feet in thickness was met with and cut through, under which fresh water was reached. In this coral stratum a human skull and sundry human bones were found imbedded."

In 1858, in dredging the harbor of Honolulu, near the Esplanade, in about twenty feet of water, it was found that underneath the mud and sand there was a stratum of hard coral rock about two feet in thickness, beneath which there was a thick layer of black volcanic sand. Embedded in this black sand were found the lower part of an ancient spear, about three feet long, and a slingstone of a red, close-grained lava, such as is not found anywhere in that vicinity.

In 1859, as Fornander relates, "Mr. R. W. Meyer, of

Kalae, Molokai, found in the side of a canyon on his estate, some seventy feet below the surface of the upper level plain, in a stratum of volcanic mud, breccia, clay and ashes, several feet in thickness, a human skull, compactly filled by the volcanic deposit surrounding it, as if it had been cast in a mould. As that stratum spreads over a considerable tract of land, at varying depths below the surface, and as the ravines and canyons which now intersect it were formed by erosion, the great age of that human skull may be reasonably inferred."

There are other indications of antiquity in the extremely primitive stage of Polynesian culture. The race was still in the Stone Age. The total absence of pottery is a significant fact, for, as Prof. Macmillan Browne observes: "All around the Pacific, on both the Asiatic and American coast, pottery has been made from time immemorial, and so it is in all the island world from the Malay peninsula south-east to the New Hebrides and Fiji."

"The absence of pottery and of the use of the bow in war makes it certain that the pre-existence of a Melanesian and Papuan substratum of population in that region, assumed by some writers, is a fiction."

In the art of making fire, as has already been stated, the Polynesians and Melanesians stand alone.

With the exception of the Easter Islanders, the Polynesians did not possess even the most rudimentary forms of writing.

The above considerations would exclude the idea of any intercourse with the East Indian Archipelago within historical times. At the same time there is no sufficient evidence of a pre-existing race in Polynesia proper, whether Melanesian or Aryan.

THE ASIATIC ORIGIN OF THE POLYNESIANS.

If now we reject the theory of an American origin for these people and turn to the west, we find that the inhabitants of the Moluccas or Spice Islands, and especially those of Gilolo, resemble the Polynesian more nearly than those of any other part of Indonesia.

Furthermore, it has been proved by Wilhelm von Humboldt and other philologists that the Polynesian speech is one member of a widely spread family of languages, including those spoken in Micronesia and in the Philippine Islands, the numerous and widely differing dialects of the Indian Archipelago, and even the language of the Hovahs in Madagascar. At the same time, we find all Eastern and South-eastern Asia occupied by Mongoloid tribes, speaking monosyllabic tonic languages, except the peninsula of Malacca, which appears to have been colonized by the Malays within historic times.

There exists, however, a wide gap between Polynesia and Indonesia, occupied by Papuans and Melaneseans. This wide gap between the Polynesians and their nearest congeners in the East Indies is one of the difficulties to be met whichever theory we may adopt as to the origin of the race. It may perhaps be accounted for by the deadly climate of the intervening islands, and the ferocity of their cannibal inhabitants.

The contrast between the Polynesian and the Melanesian of the Solomon Islands or the New Hebrides is as great as that between the North American Indian and the Congo negro, but the traces of former contact between the two races are evident enough. In fact, we must admit that, as Dr. Codrington and H. C. von der Gabelentz have shown, there is a fundamental element common to the Melanesian and Polynesian languages. As Dr. Codrington remarks: "The Polynesian has black blood in his veins, and he shows it." Indeed the darker-colored Polynesians, as has been already stated, are superior in prowess and enterprise to the lighter-colored branches of their race.

There is, however, no sufficient evidence of any Melanesian people having pre-occupied any part of the Pacific that is now inhabited by Polynesians. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Indonesia was originally occupied by black races called Negritos or Papuans, remnants of whom are found in the interior of the large islands of the Archipelago, as well as in the Philippines and New Guinea. These people must have been conquered or driven out at a very

early period by the intruding brown race, of which the Polynesians are probably an offshoot.

The great differences in language and physique, as well as in mental and moral traits, between the Polynesians and the present inhabitants of the Archipelago, combine with other considerations to prove the immense antiquity of the period when the Polynesians separated from the other branches of the Oceanic race.

It was probably during their long stay in the East Indian Archipelago that the ancestors of the Polynesians developed that skill in navigation and fondness for maritime adventure that have characterized them ever since.

It is a remarkable fact that the Hovahs, the former ruling race of Madagascar, are related to the Polynesians both in language and physique. They must, however, be a later migration from Indonesia, since they brought with them from the Archipelago their peculiar methods of smelting and working iron.

The Polynesians have remained so long in their present homes that they have preserved very few and scanty reminiscences of their stay in Indonesia. The superstitious dread of lizards, common to the Hawaiians and Maoris, and their numerous legends about gigantic reptiles, with shiny backs, huge jaws, and powerful tails, evidently point to the crocodiles of Southern Asia. Mr. S. Percy Smith mentions ancient carvings of snakes in New Zealand, "particularly noticeable," he says, "in the large boards of a carved house inland of Opotiki, where two snakes, each about fifteen feet long, are faithfully depicted." He also informs us that the most distant land mentioned in the Rarotongan traditions is called "Atia-te-varinga-nui" and that, according to the tradition, the common food of the people when living in Atia, was *vari*, until the discovery of the breadfruit. Now, according to Mr. Edward Tregear, "the name for rice in Madagascar is *vari* or *vare*; in Sunda, Macassar, Kolo and Ende, *vare*, and in Malay *pari* and *padi*." As rice is a very ancient food plant in India, and as the breadfruit is a native of Indonesia, and does not grow in Asia, this tradition seems to refer back to a migration from India to the Archipelago.

It is certain that it was from Indonesia that the principal food-plants of the Pacific, the breadfruit, the banana, the taro, the ohia or jambo, sugar cane, etc., were brought by the early emigrants.

The invaders by whom the Polynesians were crowded out of the East Indian Archipelago were no doubt Mongoloid intruders from the north, ancestors of the modern Malays, Bugis and other tribes who expelled, conquered or mingled with the brown tribes, from whom they borrowed part of their vocabulary. This process was probably going on for many centuries, as may be inferred from the great multiplicity of races and languages in the Archipelago.

Later on another immigration took place from India. We learn from Javan traditions that from and after 300 B. C. several successive waves of emigration from eastern India entered the Archipelago, bringing with them the Hindu civilization of that period, the Buddhist religion and the art of writing; besides a large number of Sanscrit terms, of which no trace can be found in the Polynesian dialects. It seems therefore most probable that the Polynesians left the Archipelago before the arrival of these new-comers.

When we undertake to trace the origin of the brown race still further back to the continent of Asia, we are beset with difficulties, and find but very slight clues to guide us.

The late J. R. Logan, the historian Fornander, Mr. S. Percy Smith, and others who have made a special study of the subject, agree in the opinion that the remote ancestors of these people emigrated from Northern India before it was invaded by the Aryan race. This opinion is founded on resemblances in physical appearances and customs between them and the aborigines of that region, such as the Todas, the Bhotiyas and other hill tribes. The evidence of language, however, is entirely wanting.

Yet, as before stated, at the present time all South-eastern Asia is occupied by Mongoloid tribes, speaking tonic, monosyllabic languages, while all traces of any preceding populations are well nigh obliterated.

THE ARYAN AND SEMITIC THEORIES.

A number of Polynesian scholars have been led by similarities in customs and verbal analogies to trace the origin of the race still further back into Western Asia, to claim for it a blood relationship with the Aryan or Indo-European division of mankind, and to find in it the impress of ancient Cushite culture and religion.

This theory, however, does not find much favor with the leading ethnologists of the present day, and is at best only a plausible hypothesis, based on insufficient data.

On the other hand, the Rev. Dr. Macdonald of the New Hebrides Mission, who is a Semitic as well as a Melanesian linguist, entirely rejects the theory of an Indian origin for the Oceanic races, and brings forward a mass of evidence to prove that the Melanesian languages, at least, are akin to the Semitic, and that the Oceanic races originally came from Southern Arabia and Abyssinia, which was a negroid Semitic colony. From this region he believes that the "Oceanic race, originally, in ancient times, migrated along the east coast of Africa to Madagascar, and along the south coast of Asia to the Malay Archipelago." This theory may help to account for the African as well as the Semitic elements which are found in the Papuan and Melanesian races, and also in a much less degree in the Polynesian races.

But he does not seem to realize the profound differences—physical, mental, and moral—between the typical Polynesian and the Melanesian, as well as the immense lapse of time that must have intervened between their emigrations to the Pacific.

Too little is known about the history of the racial changes and migrations in Southern and Western Asia during the Stone Age to justify dogmatism on the subject. In fact, the majority of European ethnologists appear at present to favor the European instead of the Asiatic origin of the Aryan race.

It needs no argument to prove that physical and mental characteristics should carry much greater weight than language in tracing the origin of races. It is also a settled

principle that grammatical structure is a much safer guide than resemblances of isolated words in such inquiries. In two respects the Polynesians belong to a radically different class from either the Semitic or Aryan languages. As has already been stated, unlike either of them, it is an analytical, uninflected language. It has not lost any inflections, because it has never had any to lose. Again, in both the Semitic and Aryan families of languages, the consonants form the skeleton, the essential significant element of the words, while the Polynesian, on the contrary, is a vowel language, with few consonants, and those easily changed or dropped while the vowels are fairly constant. Besides, the system of consanguinity that originally existed among the Polynesians, according to Morgan, connects them rather with the aborigines of India than with either the Semites or Aryans.

This view does not by any means exclude the probability that the ancestors of the Polynesians in pre-historic times were in contact with and had intercourse first with Semitic races and in later times with the "pre-Vedic Aryans," as Judge Fornander calls them. The evidence of these influences is too strong to be set aside. The subject is too extensive to be treated here. The existence among them of a strain of lighter-colored people with sandy or reddish hair, called in Hawaii *ehu* and in New Zealand *kehu*, may be due to intermingling with another race, either in India or the Malay Archipelago.

CONCLUSION.

To conclude, the theory which best meets all the facts (though not free from difficulties) is that the remote ancestors of the Polynesian race in pre-historic ages dwelt in Northern India; that from thence they spread through Farther India into the East Indian Archipelago, where they exterminated the aboriginal black races or drove them into the mountains; that they afterwards were in their turn conquered, amalgamated with, or expelled by Mongoloid tribes from the Mainland of Asia; that then the more enterprising and adventurous of them migrated into the Pacific, pass-

ing north of New Guinea, and between the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands, which were occupied by ferocious black cannibals, and finally settled in what is now called Polynesia.

Probably many separate parties of colonists at different times sailed into that unknown ocean, carrying with them their domestic animals, food-plants, their ancestral gods and traditions, and gradually peopled one group after another of the fairest islands on which the sun has ever shone.